Anarchism

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At its core, anarchism is indeed a spirit—one that cries out against all that's wrong with present-day society, and yet boldly proclaims all that could be right under alternate forms of social organization. There are many different though often complementary ways of looking at anarchism, but in a nutshell, it can be defined as the striving toward a "free society of free individuals." This phrase is deceptively simple. Bound within it is both an implicit multidimensional critique and an expansive, if fragile, reconstructive vision.

Here, a further shorthand depiction of anarchism is helpful: the ubiquitous "circle A" image. The A is a placeholder for the ancient Greek word *anarkhia*—combining the root *an(a)*, "without," and *arkh(os)*, "ruler, authority"—meaning the absence of authority. More contemporaneously and accurately, it stands for the absence of both domination (mastery or control over another) and hierarchy (ranked power relations of dominance and subordination). The circle could be considered an O, a placeholder for "order" or, better yet, "organization," drawing on Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's seminal definition in *What Is Property?* (1840): "as man [sic] seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy." The circle A symbolizes anarchism as a dual project: the abolition of domination and hierarchical forms of social organization, or power-over social relations, and their replacement with horizontal versions, or power-together and in common—again, a free society of free individuals.

Anarchism is a synthesis of the best of liberalism and the best of communism, elevated and transformed by the best of traditions that work toward an egalitarian, voluntarily, and nonhierarchical society. The project of liberalism in the broadest sense is to ensure personal liberty. Communism's overarching project is to ensure the communal good. One could, and should, question the word "free" in both cases, particularly in the actual implementations of liberalism and communism, and their shared emphasis on the state and property as ensuring freedom. Nonetheless, respectively, and at their most "democratic," one's aim is an individual who can live an emancipated life, and the other seeks a community structured along collectivist lines. Both are worthy notions. Unfortunately, freedom can never be achieved in this lopsided manner: through the self or society. The two necessarily come into conflict, almost instantly. Anarchism's great leap was to combine self and society in one political vision; at the same time, it jettisoned the state and property as the pillars of support, relying instead on self-organization and mutual aid.

Anarchism as a term emerged in nineteenth-century Europe, but its aspirations and practices grew out of, in part, hundreds of years of slave rebellions, peasant uprisings, and heretical reli-

gious movements around the world in which people decided that enough was enough, and the related experimentation for centuries with various forms of autonomy.

Anarchism was also partly influenced by Enlightenment thought in the eighteenth century, which—at its best—popularized three pivotal notions, to a large degree theorized from these revolts. First: Individuals have the capacity to reason. Second: If humans have the capacity to reason, then they also have the capacity to act on their thoughts. Perhaps most liberating, a third idea arose: If people can think and act on their own initiative, then it literally stands to reason that they can potentially think through and act on notions of the good society. They can innovate; they can create a better world.

A host of Enlightenment thinkers offered bold new conceptions of social organization, drawn from practice and yet articulated in theory, ranging from individual rights to self-governance. Technological advancements in printing facilitated the relatively widespread dissemination of this written material for the first time in human history via books, pamphlets, and periodicals. New common social spaces like coffeehouses, public libraries, and speakers' corners in parks allowed for debate about and the spread of these incendiary ideas. None of this ensured that people would think for themselves, act for themselves, or act out of a concern for humanity. But what was at least theoretically revolutionary about this Copernican turn was that before then, the vast majority of people largely didn't believe in their own agency or ability to self-organize on such an interconnected, self-conscious, and crucially, widespread basis. They were born, for instance, into an isolated village as a serf with the expectation that they'd live out their whole lives accordingly. In short, that they would accept their lot and the social order as rigidly god-given or natural—with any hopes for a better life placed in the afterlife.

Due to the catalytic relationship between theory and practice, many people gradually embraced these three Enlightenment ideas, leading to a host of libertarian ideologies, from the religious congregationalisms to secular republicanism, liberalism, and socialism. These new radical impulses took many forms of political and economic subjugation to task, contributing to an outbreak of revolutions throughout Europe and elsewhere, such as in Haiti, the United States, and Mexico. This revolutionary period started around 1789 and lasted until about 1871 (reappearing in the early twentieth century).

Anarchism developed within this milieu as, in "classical" anarchist Peter Kropotkin's words, the "left wing" of socialism. Like all socialists, anarchists concentrated on the economy, specifically capitalism, and saw the laboring classes in the factories and fields, as well as artisans, as the main agents of revolution. They also felt that many socialists were to the "right" or nonlibertarian side of anarchism, soft on their critique of the state, to say the least. These early anarchists, like all anarchists after them, saw the state as equally complicit in structuring social domination; the state complemented and worked with capitalism, but was its own distinct entity. Like capitalism, the state will not "negotiate" with any other sociopolitical system. It attempts to take up more and more governance space. It is neither neutral nor can it be "checked and balanced." The state has its own logic of command and control, of monopolizing political power. Anarchists held that the state cannot be used to dismantle capitalism, nor as a transitional strategy toward a noncapitalist, nonstatist society. They advocated an expansive "no gods, no masters" perspective, centered around the three great concerns of their day—capital, state, and church—in contrast to, for example, *The Communist Manifesto*'s assertion that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." It's not that anarchists didn't take this history seriously; there

were other histories, though, and other struggles—something that anarchism would continue to fill out over the decades.

As many are rediscovering today, anarchism from the first explored something that Marxism has long needed to grapple with: domination and hierarchy, and their replacement in all cases with greater degrees of freedom. That said, the classical period of anarchism exhibited numerous blind spots and even a certain naïveté. Areas such as gender and race, in which domination occurs beyond capitalism, the state, and the church, were often given short shrift or ignored altogether. Nineteenth-century anarchism was not necessarily always ahead of its day in identifying various forms of oppression. Nor did it concern itself much with ecological degradation.

Of course, comparing classical anarchism to today's much more sophisticated understanding of forms of organization and the myriad types of domination is also a bit unfair—both to anarchism and other socialisms. Anarchism developed over time, theoretically and through practice. Its dynamism, an essential principle, played a large part in allowing anarchism to serve as its own challenge. Its openness to other social movements and radical ideas contributed to its further unfolding. Like any new political philosophy, it would take many minds and many experiments over many years to develop anarchism into a more full-bodied, nuanced worldview—a process, if one takes anarchism's initial impulse seriously, of always expanding that worldview to account for additional blind spots. Anarchism was, is, and continually sees itself as "only a beginning," to cite the title of a recent anthology.

From its beginnings, anarchism's core aspiration has been to root out and eradicate all coercive, hierarchical social relations, and dream up and establish consensual, egalitarian ones in every instance. In a time of revolutionary possibility, and during a period when older ways of life were so obviously being destroyed by enormous transitions, the early anarchists were frequently extravagant in their visions for a better world. They drew on what was being lost (from small-scale agrarian communities to the commons) and what was being gained (from potentially liberatory technologies to potentially more democratic political structures) to craft a set of uncompromising, reconstructive ethics.

These ethics still animate anarchism, supplying what's most compelling about it in praxis. Its values serve as a challenge to continually approach the dazzling horizon of freedom by actually improving the quality of life for all in the present. Anarchism always "demands the impossible" even as it tries to also "realize the impossible." Its idealism is thoroughly pragmatic. Hierarchical forms of social organization can never fulfill most peoples' needs or desires, but time and again, nonhierarchical forms have demonstrated their capacity to come closer to that aim. It makes eminent and ethical sense to experiment with utopian notions. No other political philosophy does this as consistently and generously, as doggedly, and with as much overall honesty about the many dead-ends in the journey itself.

Anarchism understood that any egalitarian form of social organization, especially one seeking a thoroughgoing eradication of domination, had to be premised on both individual and collective freedom—no one is free unless everyone is free, and everyone can only be free if each person can individuate or actualize themselves in the most expansive of senses. Anarchism also recognized, if only intuitively, that such a task is both a constant balancing act and the stuff of real life. One person's freedom necessarily infringes on another's, or even on the good of all. No common good can meet everyone's needs and desires. From the start, anarchism asked the difficult though ultimately pragmatic question: Acknowledging this self-society juggling act as part of the human

condition, how can people collectively self-determine their lives to become who they want to be and simultaneously create communities that are all they could be as well?

Anarchism maintains that this tension is positive, as a creative and inherent part of human existence. It highlights that people are not all alike, nor do they need, want, or desire the same things. At its best, anarchism's basic aspiration for a free society of free individuals gives transparency to what should be a democratic processes. Assembly decision-making mechanisms are hard work. They raise tough questions. But through them, people school themselves in what could be the basis for collective self-governance, for redistributing power to everyone. More crucially, people self-determine the structure of the new from spaces of possibility within the old.

Anarchism gives voice to the grand yet modest belief, embraced by people throughout human history, that we can imagine and also implement a wholly marvelous and materially abundant society. That is the spirit of anarchism, the ghost that haunts humanity: that our lives and communities really can be appreciably better. And better, and then better still.

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